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SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE TO COMMEMORATE
20TH ANNIVERSARY OF ARMENIAN EARTHQUAKE

¶1. This is an action message. See paragraph 4.

¶2. On December 7, 1988, a magnitude 6.9 earthquake struck northern Armenia, collapsing hundreds of poorly constructed buildings and killing an estimated 25,000 people, and leaving tens of thousands homeless just as a bitter . Among the victims were thousands of schoolchildren whose badly-constructed school buildings collapsed on top of them. The earthquake leveled the town of Spitak, caused massive damage in the nearby cities of Leninakan (now Gyumri) and Kirovakan (now Vanadzor), and numerous surrounding towns and villages. The event was a searing national tragedy, from which northern Armenia has not yet really recovered.

¶3. For the first time, the Soviet Union accepted U.S. and international offers of disaster relief aid, and this became the de facto beginning of the U.S.-Armenia bilateral relationship. President Reagan's outgoing Administration dispatched rescue squads from Fairfax County, Virginia, and Miami-Dade County, Florida, to assist in the search for survivors in the collapsed buildings, and USAID/OFDA sent a disaster relief team to provide urgent humanitarian assistance, in cooperation with other international donors. The Administration also sent Vice President/President-elect George H.W. Bush's son Jeb Bush to Armenia, accompanied by his young son George P. Bush, as a special presidential envoy in honor of the tragic deaths. The Armenian-American community was galvanized to raise funds and procure tons of relief supplies, for which the U.S. Government was able to provide airlift.

¶4. ACTION REQUEST: The 20th anniversary of the Spitak/Leninakan (Gyumri) earthquake will be a very high-profile opportunity to express sympathy and solidarity with the Armenian people on the occasion of a massive national tragedy. Post recommends that the President issue a message to commemorate the 20th anniversary, for posting to the White House website. The Embassy will then distribute the presidential statement (with an Armenian translation) as an embassy press release, which we expect would garner national media attention and be very favorably received by the Armenian people, both at home and in the worldwide Diaspora.

¶5. PROPOSED TEXT OF PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENT:

Today marks the 20th anniversary of the devastating earthquake which ravaged northern Armenia on December 7, 1988. That terrible earthquake took the lives of some 25,000 Armenians, including thousands of children. This national catastrophe also left many thousands of people without homes, at the outset of a bitterly cold winter, creating terrible hardship for survivors grieving the loss of their loved ones. Americans join all Armenians in remembering this time of national tragedy and in honoring those whose lives were lost.

The birth of the modern relationship between the United States and the soon-to-be independent Republic of Armenia

came in the aftermath of this disaster. A distinguishing quality of the human spirit is the fact that at such a time of suffering and loss, people from around the world put aside political disagreements for the higher purpose of rescuing and protecting those who are in need. I am proud that the United States was quick to respond to Armenia's need, working in partnership with the Armenian people and with other nations likewise supplying help. I'm especially proud of America's Armenian community, who exemplified the finest aspects of both American and Armenian character, and rallied to provide great help to their ancestral homeland.

I honor the courage and spirit of the Armenian people, who faced such grave challenges with grace, dignity, resilience, and national purpose. On this 20th anniversary, Laura and I express our sincere condolences and best wishes to Armenia as you remember the loved ones you have lost and the hardships you have overcome.
YOVANOVITCH